POETS AND HEALERS

Janice Willms
3843 Center Avenue,
Santa Barbara CA 93110

When they ask me, as of late they frequently do, how I have for so many years continued an equal interest in medicine and the poem, I reply that they amount for me to nearly the same thing.

William Carlos Williams from *Autobiography*

When contemplating the value of the poem to the healer, one only has to recall the number of physicians who take up the pen. Why does this happen? What is it about putting in words the joy and the sorrow, the sense of power juxtaposed against feelings of helplessness, the failures and successes that make up the profession's daily menu? If you are a poet, closeted or published, you know the answer.

Not only doctors and nurses write poems about their work and their patients, but patients write poems about their illnesses and their caregivers. The patient's muse may be a different one than he or she who guides the physician-poet, but the healing force is similar.

A case could be made for every member of our profession giving consideration to the voices of both colleagues and patients to more clearly appreciate what we are about. One need not write poetry to be able to read it, and to thereby learn more about the human condition. "Poetry!" you retort. "Whatever has poetry to do with me? To begin with, I find it unaccessible, I do not understand it, it seems trivial." In a poem called *Poetry,* Marianne Moore recognizes and addresses these concerns, "I, too, dislike it: there are things that are important beyond all this fiddle./ Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one discovers in/ it, after all, a place for the genuine." And the "genuine," the rawness of human experience, may become the window through which we can understand ourselves and our fellows.

Poetry

FIRE SHADOWS

Gwen Head
72 Eucalyptus Road, Berkeley, CA 94705

Disorder and Early Sorrow

Help me, Dr. Joyce Brothers.
What would *you* do
with one kid, twenty, male, outdoors lamenting,
worst among many woes, his dilatory
and probably irremediable virginity?

And indoors, another, female, fifteen, dead
still for two hours behind a locked bathroom door—
not a whimper, retch, or flush?

Outdoors, the vagabond son of an old friend,
is not really outdoors. His habitat is a hermitage
on wheels, a much-recycled
Volkswagen camper craggy with spare batteries,
fuses, Pennzoil, Pop Tarts,
its ornamental foliage four weeks' worth
of unwashed laundry.
His *wanderjahr* is gilt-edged, his depression
soothed by a single plastic, multi-purpose
tool. Issued by AmEx to his trust,
it's less confusing than a forty-two
piece wrench set,
or a woman.

Indoors, again entreated, soundlessly
slides dead-bolt back, and manifests herself
hunched, mussy, tear-slimed, shuddering
between the bathtub's claws.
She's downed
the shower-curtain rod, spewed hoarded ribbons,
earrings, barrettes, eyeliner, hosed the whole
mess down with shampoo and peroxide—
even the fallen shower curtain, knotted
with pantyhose, even the tattered
copies of *Vogue.*

What *I* could do, Dr. Joyce, wasn't much. Outdoors,
ravenous with grief, requested a ham
sandwich. No, make that two,
with lettuce, tomato, mayo.
Indoors preferred to order off the menu:
one soap opera, madhouse, gun.

Ballade: Self and Not-Self

These things start early. Each time you came in
to your own room after absence, you would seek
out favorite books, toys, animals; first check
each idiosyncrasy of fur, wheel, spine,
then gather and marshall them all. A stout front line
might not hold fast. No, each must be one spoke
in a stilled circumference that would not break,
whatever the steep velocity of time.
These are my things, the things that make me mine.

Christmas, fifteen years later. Welcomed back,
you practiced aversion, shut doors and lowered blinds.
Regurgitated grass, fur, bone bits, rug twine—
the hall was your hairball. Bilious, you brooked
no taste of others, but upchucked my alarm clock,
your father's sock, an old friend's Valentine,
like a prissy old cat—you whom I thought my kitten!—
to feast on dead dolls, eyes blank, limbs stained, manes hacked.
These are my things, the things that make me mine.

Where you've sent yourself now, the staff had never seen
or toted so much identity. Swiftly locked
down, you relaxed.
Next day I scrabbled through seawrack
in your fetid basement: spavined slingbacks, magazines,
dirty clothes, journals, music-boxes, knick nacks,
mirrors, earrings, sewing kits unraveling…
And shopping-bagged stashes of Lithium, Depakote, Navane.
And your baby powder spilled, dispersed like smoke.

These were my things, the things that made me mine.

POETS AND HEALERS cont'd

Poetry—the creation or the reading of poetry—is one form of healing. Robert Coles gave early impetus to the idea of stories as a means of better understanding one's patients in his treatise *The Call of Stories.*[1] Using works of fiction and poetry, Coles shows we can learn about others through the power of storytelling—not just the history of the present illness as we traditionally structure it—but the life story that underlies the meaning of illness to the patient. Howard Brody expands upon this when he discusses the importance of the life story to the sufferer's perception of his or her change in position brought on by an illness that alters expectations.[2] The "stories" referred to by Coles and Brady may be in the form of oral histories, prose accounts, and poetic expressions of fears and hopes. Not only do these life stories help patients formulate their own positions, but they are of great help to professionals who are trying to deal with the wide variation in patient responses to pain, unhappy diagnoses, frightening treatments, and uncertain outcomes.

Examples of patient perceptions, often not expressed in ordinary patient-doctor dialogue but appearing in the poetic images conjured by the sufferer, may solve a multitude of mysteries. A review of poems, for example, of women having treatment for breast cancer, provides insight into such "problems" as resistance to certain forms of therapy, and fears the doctor may never have considered, and may lead to helpful changes in management strategies.

We pride ourselves in our listening skills. But listening must go beyond the facts of the symptoms and pass into learning what these details mean to the patient. This heightened awareness can be helped by reading the poetry of those who have become "victims" of illness.

But patients are not the only ones who heal by means of poetry. Ours is a "sickening" profession at times. If we are at all in touch with our humanity, we must feel our own sickness of heart and soul as we deal with the suffering of others. Williams sees no difference between medicine and poetry.

POETS AND HEALERS cont'd

In his eyes they are variations on the same theme: to be human is to suffer, and suffering requires description. Unlike most of us, Williams and his poetically gifted colleagues are able to write well enough to both heal the writer and provide assurance to the reader. We do not all have the gift of poetry, but we can all read. And by engaging ourselves with these expressions of our common agonies and joys, we can affirm our humanity.

The poems of our colleagues can reassure us that we are not alone. There is no doubt, sense of guilt, or inadequacy that others of us have not felt. As a group, we don't comfortably share these feelings, which expose our Achilles' tendons, our failings. Even if we cannot speak aloud to one another, we can commune through poetry. For example, how easy is it to admit that we don't always like our patients? Dannie Abse takes this burden on his own shoulders in his short poem, *The Doctor.* He admits his guilt and allows us to share it.[3] In addition to his poems about the pain of failure, John Stone writes of the power, the glory, and the sacred covenant assumed upon becoming a physician in *Gaudeamus Igitur.*[4] With him we can celebrate the privilege of being doctors. Others have written of the meaning to them of losing a favored patient or a family member for whom they have cared, or the ambivalence of "pulling the plug." We have all been there. Isn't it comforting to know that others have been also, and only differ from us in their ability to create the words to express what we feel.

If you haven't yet, healer, try poetry. To discover its gifts and its value to us as professionals is a wonderment worth experiencing.

1. Coles R. *The Call of Stories.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989.
2. Brody H. *Stories of Sickness.* New Haven: Yale UP, 1987.
3. Abse, D. *Poems from the Medical World.* Lancaster: MTP Press Ltd., 1980; 16.
4. Stone J. *Renaming the Streets.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1985; 21.

These poems are from Gwen Head's fourth collection of poetry, *Fire Shadows*, which will be published by the Louisiana State University Press. Her other books are *Special Effects*, *The Ten Thousandth Night*, and *Frequencies: A Gamut of Poems*. Head's poems, fiction, and essays have appeared in *The American Poetry Review*, *The Yale Review*, *American Voice*, *The Southern Review*, and *Ballet Review*, among many other publications. She has taught at the Iowa Writers Workshop and the University of California, Davis, as well as many writers conferences. Of these, her favorite is the Writers at Work Conference in Park City, Utah, where she met her husband, biographer Bernard Taper. Head's honors include a 1995 Literature Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts that supported the completion of *Fire Shadows*.